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ABSTRACT

Draft specifications for an undergraduate course in professional writing, designed to teach practical writing skills, are presented in this paper. The paper notes the need for such a course to prepare professional personnel for the writing they do in their jobs, and it suggests that the course be aimed at juniors and seniors in liberal arts, engineering, and business programs. It then presents a prospective outline for the course, indicating topics that would be covered in an introductory course overview and in teaching students about six areas: (1) making decisions about documents, (2) prewriting steps, (3) writing and designing a document, (4) editing and revising a document, (5) evaluating documents, and (6) legal drafting and forms design. The paper also discusses the course format, materials for the course, and staffing for the course. (GT)

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DOCUMENT DESIGN PROJECT

Draft Specifications for an Undergraduate Course in Professional Writing

Prepared for the National Institute of Education, Washington, D.C., under Contract No. NIE-400-78-0043.

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Draft Specifications for an Undergraduate
Course in Professional Writing

A. *Need*

Many of the lawyers and program staff in government agencies who write regulations, manuals, guidelines and forms have never been trained as writers. The themes they wrote in college composition courses, traditionally taken in the Freshman year, were insufficient preparation for the type of writing assignments that they get at work. The writing they did in their courses was not necessarily good training for the writing they do in their jobs.

While there are courses in technical and business communication at many schools, liberal arts students seldom take them. There are few courses that teach practical writing skills for students who major in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences.

B. *Audience*

The course will be aimed at juniors and seniors in the liberal arts. It will also be suitable for engineering and business students.

Upper class students are the appropriate audience for two reasons. They have the substantive background to write intelligently about a professional field. They are concerned with skills needed in the working world. Conversations with professors at many colleges confirm that students today are highly motivated to acquire saleable skills, including the ability to write well.

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C. *Content of the Course*

The course will follow the model of document design developed by the Document Design Project (DDP). It will be an expanded version of the intensive three-day workshop DDP created to provide in-service training for government lawyers and program staff.

A prospective outline for the course is:

INTRODUCTION

- overview of the course, what the course covers and what it does not cover
- the need for a process approach to writing documents
- the role of documents in society, government, and business

PART 1: THREE PRELIMINARY DECISIONS

Defining Your Purpose:

- deciding what the document must achieve
- different types of documents and how they relate to different types of writing (genre and rhetorical purpose)

Determining Your Audience:

- importance of knowing who will read your document
- how to find out who your audience is
- writing for different audiences
- writing for multiple audiences

Knowing the Context and Constraints:

- importance of knowing how the document will be used
- finding out what the instructions for an assignment are
- working within a budget, a deadline, a length limit, a system of documents
- working in a management system, knowing who will review your work

PART 2: PRE-WRITING STEPS

Selecting the Appropriate Content:

- generating ideas
- collecting research
- deciding on the important message
- supporting your position
- how to decide what your audience knows and what they need and want to learn

Organizing Your Material:

- organizing information for different purposes and different audiences
- how to organize material logically and coherently
- how to show the organization to your reader (outlining, table of contents, use of headings)

PART 3: WRITING AND DESIGNING A DOCUMENT

Writing the First Draft:

- how to write clear, concise prose, cutting out the gobbledygook
- formal and informal style
- when jargon is appropriate, and when it is not

Using Graphics to Help Present the Message:

- the role graphics can play in document design
- working with a designer when appropriate
- a brief introduction to typography and decisions that designers make (typeface, type sizes, leading, use of caps, italics, bold, boxes and other special markers)

PART 4: EDITING AND REVISING

Techniques for Reviewing Documents:

- writing several drafts
- how to edit your own material
- going over the guidelines
- peer review of materials

PART 5: EVALUATING THE DOCUMENT

Techniques for Finding Out If Your Document Works:

- why bother?
- readability formulas - what they are, their uses and their limitations
- feedback from reviewers
- field testing a document that will have wide circulation

PART 6: SPECIAL TOPICS

Legal Drafting

Forms Design

As an upper level course comparable to advanced expository writing for English majors or technical writing for engineers, the course in professional writing will expect students to have basic writing skills. Reference books and handbooks will be available to resolve questions of grammar, punctuation and usage; but the course itself will not spend class time on mechanics.

D. *Format of the Course*

The course has to be flexible because every English teacher adapts material to his or her own teaching style, students and particular interests. Schools differ in the number of weeks that the quarter or semester runs and the hours given to a course. To allow for this needed flexibility, we will prepare material in modules with basic and supplementary sections.

We envisage a course with some lectures, readings in the prepared material and in a collection of examples, lots of exercises and short assignments to go with each section. There will also be a semester-long project which is reviewed at each of four steps: 1) pre-writing decisions on topic, purpose, audience, constraints; 2) an outline showing content and organization decisions; 3) first draft; 4) draft including a report of review and evaluation techniques used.

The course is intended for classes of 15-20 students. The small group size is essential to providing individual attention to each student's writing needs.

E. *Materials for the Course*

Course materials should eventually include:

- a text,
- an instructor's manual with suggestions for exercises, supplementary material, and suggestions for different ways to use the text, and
- a book of readings.

During the coming year, we will develop a detailed syllabus, material for the instructor's manual, and a collection of examples.

The readings will be good and poor examples of real world documents from government and business. Poor examples can help students learn how to criticize a document, which is an important skill.

The readings will not be fiction or essays of famous social scientists because this is not a course in creative writing or a course in how to write like a history or government professor. One of the early classes will include a discussion of the different styles of writing appropriate for fiction, academic papers, and public-oriented documents.

F. *Staffing for the Course*

There are several ways to staff the course. It could be offered by the English department, by one or more of the content departments (government, sociology, etc.), or by an interdisciplinary group. It should be taught by a faculty member trained in the teaching of composition. The cooperation of a member of the Design Department or an outside designer would be helpful to teach the sessions on graphics. A specialist in evaluation methods could teach the sessions on field testing.

Some schools have outsiders teach all or part of advanced courses in exposition, business or technical writing. Such a person could appropriately serve as teacher or reviewer of papers if he or she has training and skills in writing clearly and in teaching others to write clearly. Inviting local people in law, banking, insurance, government or business who have been concerned with clear English communication to speak to the class can help students relate the course to career opportunities.

The course will work best in an environment where professors in other departments are supportive of the aims of the course. "Writing across the curriculum" workshops, "team teaching" of content and writing courses, or outreach efforts by writing labs would be excellent complements to the course in professional writing.

A major objective of the course is to give students skills that will be useful in their professions. The course will be most successful when the assignments are linked to the student's work in other courses, in an outside job or internship, or to real concerns the student has as a citizen. The major paper could be jointly submitted to the writing course and a content course, but if the professor in the content course is looking for a paper heavy in jargon and academic gobbledygook, the purpose of the clear writing course will be defeated.